Textiles as Testimony: The Art of T. Vinoja

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T. Vinoja is an artist who uses textile mediums to express experiences related to war, displacement, and trauma in Sri Lanka.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** Colomboscope.

Enduring Traces: The Significance of Lineage in Collective Memory.

Vinoja began working with textiles in 2018, choosing this medium for its marginalized status and deep symbolic connections. Fabric is like a “second skin” of the human body, used from birth to death, used for bandaging wounds during wartime, and employed in creating bunkers for shelter during airstrikes, explains Vinoja, concluded an exhibition titled Contours of a Breathing Land that brought together her artwork from her projects for the Sharjah Biennial 16 and her post-graduation exhibition at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore. Vinoja sees textiles as a powerful medium to express the scars that exist everywhere – on human bodies, in the landscape, and in collective memory. Her works are a collection of wounded histories, sutured by hand, carrying the marks of both human loss and environmental devastation—lands poisoned, waters rendered toxic, and generations made to inherit both memory and absence.

For Vinoja, there is personal inspiration for working with textiles that is derived partly from her mother, who was a seamstress, giving her an early experience with hand stitching, hence rendering a closer connection when working with textiles, finding the process more engaging and personally meaningful. Vinoja describes the hand-stitching process as meditative and healing. Small stitches require patience and deep engagement, creating a calm mind. “Unlike painting, stitching involves personal investment and patience. Each of my artworks begins as a personal conversation but becomes public when displayed, creating dialogue with audiences

who bring their experiences and perspectives to interpretation," explains Vinoja.

Vinoja's chosen means of carrying memories of war and displacement include weaving and hand-stitching. Her textile installations draw on inherited works like Kolam while incorporating natural dyes reflecting northern Vanni's landscape. She threads miniature texts from the Tamil Sangam literature, connecting themes of conflict, loss, and love. Works like Times Haunted by Fear and Horror transform fabric into maps of resistance, while Shattered Horizons conveys the fractured geographies of dislocation. Through each stitch, Vinoja renders the bunker, the landmine, and the haunted terrain as woven testimonies of war's lasting imprint. A conversation between past and present, between people and the land, between grief and the resilience to keep breathing.

Interestingly, Vinoja's textile installations are more than a personal standpoint; they are more than personal memories. The artist insists on listening to others' experiences to incorporate collective memory into her work. By collecting stories from people affected by war, she has incorporated collective memory into her work, making it more complete and fulfilling. Vinoja describes how this process creates a sense of honesty and connection to the emotional experiences of others. The artist explains further about her artwork that they connect human and geological timescales, noting how landscapes change over time through natural processes and human intervention, with land itself bearing witness to historical events.

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Artist T Vinoja



‘Mullivaikkal’ is created using acrylic paint, natural dyes, threads, fabrics, bandages,

and needlework.

According to Vinoja, art is a form of therapy and healing that allows the expression of emotional experiences that might be difficult to articulate directly.

She emphasizes the importance of artists speaking about war and conflict now rather than waiting decades, creating a contemporary dialogue where all voices, especially marginalized ones, can be heard. The artist's motivation stems from not wanting such wars to happen again in Sri Lanka.

However, painful memories cannot be forgotten. Hence, Vinoja emphasizes that people's experiences through the war must be acknowledged as part of a justice and reconciliation process. Yet, Vinoja's creations don't directly speak about justice; they allow viewers to recognize the impact of violence, potentially leading them to reject such violence in the future. In telling her story, Vinoja tells the story of countless others—those who lived, those who were silenced, and those who continue to carry the weight of what happened. And in doing so, she reminds us that even amid devastation, there is still life, memory, and land that refuses to stop breathing.

Expanding her creative repertoire beyond Sri Lanka, Vinoja held a month-long solo exhibition titled "A Moving Cloak in Terrain" at Mumbai's Experimenter. This exhibition continued her textile artwork theme, exploring wounded histories and the lasting impact of the Sri Lankan civil war. As Vinoja continues her storytelling journey, every thread she weaves and every installation she constructs is a testament to survival and a call to witness.